

A BOX FULL OF ROLLS

an autobiography by

FRANK W HOLLAND

founder of the Musical Museum



Preface

In 1988 the Musical Museum celebrated a quarter of a century of existence. Throughout that time its founder and director, Frank Walter Holland, M.B.E., has been responsible for the establishment of one of the most extensive museum collections of automatic musical instruments in the world.

Born in 1910 and living through the period when many of the instruments in the collection reached popularity and then fell from public awareness, Frank has, almost single-handed, done more to restore them, not only to working condition but also to general acclaim as clever inventions, than anyone else. His fascinating life, and single-minded determination to secure a long-term future for the collection, is briefly explained. Ever busy, he was persuaded to spend a few moments to put down his reflections on reaching this notable anniversary. To do full justice to his achievements would require a heavier volume than this, together with extensive research into the substantial archives the museum has accumulated. Perhaps one day that too will be written.

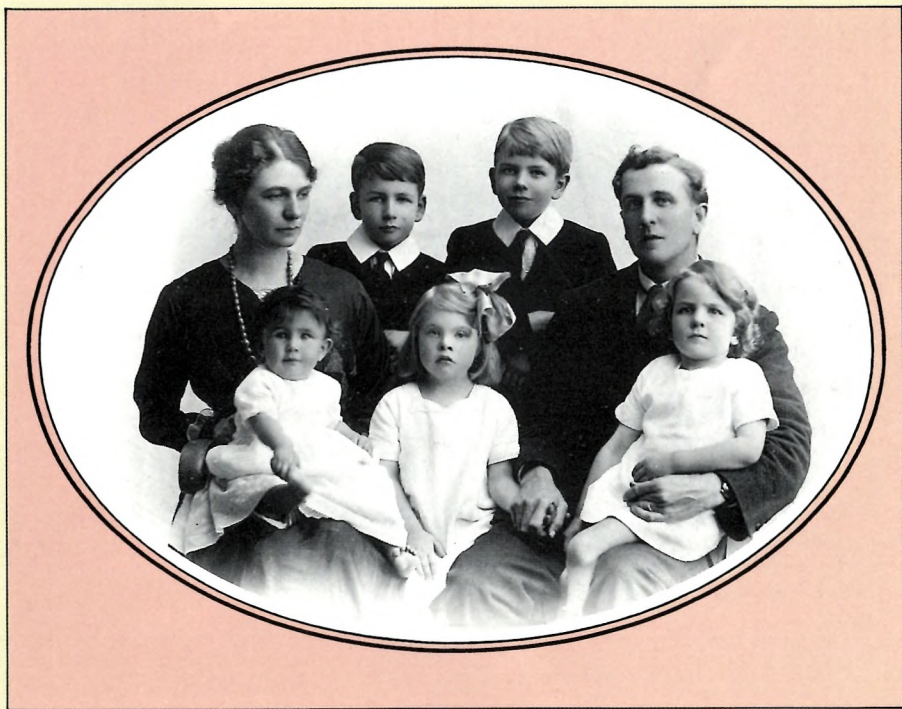
On behalf of all the museum's trustees and supporters it gives me great pleasure to salute the achievements described here.

Michael J. Ryder, M.Phil., F.C.A.
Chairman of Trustees

A Box Full of Rolls

I suppose I have always been surrounded by pianos not just since I started the museum but ever since I can remember. We had one at home, a Grover & Grover, on which I learned to play. As a family we all had to learn how to entertain not only ourselves but others as well. My father was a Trinity House channel pilot, and came from a long line of sea-faring folk. My mother came from Galley Hill, Swanscombe, from a family of quarrymen—The Northfleet Coal & Ballast Co., and the Thurrock Chalk & Whiting Co.

They had three sons and two daughters and I was the eldest. My mother was quite a good pianist, and how she put up with our endless practice I do not know. I disliked practising and found reading the music difficult from the



Left to right: Back row—*Clara (née Kirby), my mother, Jack, Frank, Walter (father).*
Front row—*Margaret, Mary, Maurice.*

stupid system which has grown up around us over the centuries. However, when I was about seven my music teacher discovered that I had perfect pitch and I was able to memorise a tune quickly and then replay it without needing to use the music. Maybe this explains why, even after all these years, I am fascinated by making music from a music roll rather than by playing by hand. Popular tunes I could play on the piano included 'Tea for Two', 'The Doll Dance', 'Carolina Moon', and 'Wedding of the Painted Doll' To exercise my sight-reading I was given a few difficult unusual classical pieces, but I never really liked them. My music teacher never gave me any Chopin which I have since grown to like. Other composers I remember trying included Chaminade, Heller, Nickolls and Roeckel. I learnt the piano from the age of about seven until I was sixteen when I left school (1926).

In 1931 Mr. Pot founded the Dutch Klavascrifo Institute at Slikkerveer, near Rotterdam. This was to promote a new vertical notation particularly useful for keyboard playing. The original intention was that music teachers would introduce students to it and they would learn to play from it, but it was too slow a business so special correspondence courses resulted. Now some 10,000 students in Holland benefit from this simple system and there are over 25,000 editions of music available. If this system had appeared earlier and been available in England I am sure that I would have become hooked on it, and



The large KLAVAR notice that I use to publicise this method of recording music notation. I think it is so much easier to follow than the traditional method. 1986.

should have been able to play by sight even today. In the museum we have other systems of notation designed to make reading music easier, but the Klavar system, in my view, is the best. Children regularly sit at the piano in the museum and, on reading from the Klavar music, play a simple tune in a matter of seconds. On a visit to the factory I watched while one of the Klavar team sat at a special piano linked to a forty year old recording machine, and played a piece of Beethoven, and it came out printed on a tape 4 inches wide. Today the music is printed by computer and they add 200 new titles to the list every year. If you are thinking of learning to play the piano I strongly recommend that you try the Klavar system. I have inserted this paragraph to explain my comment above about 'the stupid system'.

We lived in Gravesend, and a colleague of my father from Pier Road, Northfleet, had a player piano. We children were not allowed to touch it for fear we might damage it and, like so often in life, being denied something makes you want it even more. I was determined to find out how and why it worked. On one occasion when I was at boarding school at Deal School, Kent, I thought I could improve a very poor old upright, so I took it to pieces. Naturally, at the age of ten I did not get it back together again correctly, with the result that enclosed with my end of term report was a bill addressed to my father for 7s. 6d. to have the piano repaired!

- On leaving school I eventually became an apprentice with B.T.H. at Rugby where I became interested in the whole area of electricity, motors and machinery. In order to entertain ourselves in the house where I was then staying I built, using Meccano parts, a gramophone which would automatically play eighteen records. I copied an American design I saw in a magazine and it worked perfectly for quite a number of years. My modest earnings meant I could not afford to buy a similar machine. For younger readers I should just say that the records were heavy old 78s and a stack of eighteen is quite a weight. I used a Diehl Aristocrat gramophone motor which was imported from the USA by Claud Lyons of Liverpool. Years later he joined the Player Piano Group which I founded.

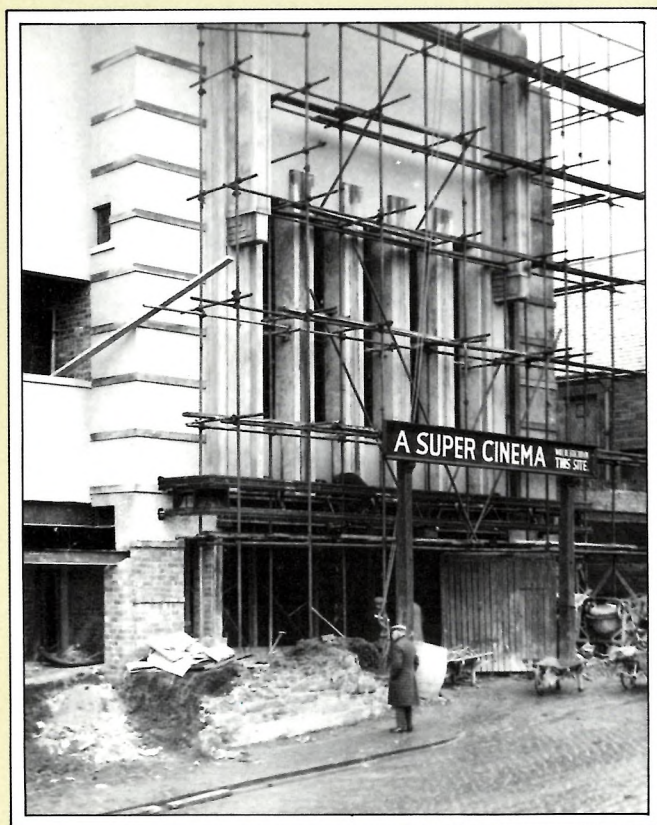
When I left B.T.H. I joined R.C.A. for a year installing their sound systems in cinemas all over the country. I suppose that experience led me into my continuing interest in cinema equipment of all types including the theatre organs then found in many cinemas. I remember one February in 1937 in the Rio, Kirkcaldy, Scotland, I was trying to solder joints and snow was coming through the unfinished roof of the projection room. The cold was so intense I could not get the soldering iron hot enough. Then I thought it might work if I bound it up with asbestos tape and this did the trick. I put this idea in to R.C.A. as a suggestion for other engineers working in cold projection rooms!

When war broke out in 1939 I was working for the Central London Electricity Supply Co. and, as this was a reserved occupation, was not called up but transferred to the Ministry of Works to help with supplying power to factories and essential services. This meant I remained in London throughout the war including the worst of the Blitz. I had to change houses and flats no less than seven times as a result of bomb damage. Looking back I really cannot

imagine how we kept the supply going with so much daily damage. The engineers at the power stations, as well as those who maintained the system, worked very long hours and under extremely dangerous conditions.

There were many occasions when the trolley bus or tram overhead was blown down by bombing and quick repairs had to be made to restore power in order that people could get into work. Sometimes petrol buses were used to keep these damaged services going, but I think the old trams gave the most frequent and reliable service. One of the most spectacular jobs occurred in Westminster Bridge Road where an enormous crater was blown in the road by a heavy bomb. It damaged all the underground services, water, gas, and electricity. The tram track was destroyed and when I first saw it I thought it could never be repaired but with the hasty construction of a bridge over the hole the tramlines were reconnected and temporary repairs made in the electricity supply with the result that the tram service was operating again very soon. Perhaps many will remember pictures of this as it appeared in several papers and magazines.

My own work developed in the use of radio frequencies as a means of quick heating in manufacturing processes. We developed through some hair-



The 'Rio', Kircaldy, Scotland, during construction, 1935-37, where I nearly froze to death trying to install R.C.A. sound equipment prior to the opening on 1st February 1937.
Photo: ROBERT SCOTT.

raising experiments the laws of physics which were then applied to the creation of manufacturing machinery. They were exciting and challenging times. I remember doing some experiments for the directors of Ferodo at Chapel-en-le-Frith, Derbyshire, on brake linings. These linings were impregnated with resins for bonding which had to be raised to a certain temperature. The power from the $\frac{1}{4}$ kW 50MHz set was gradually increased until the mass began to smoke. I advised caution at this stage but the directors insisted that I continue to increase the power, which I did, but suddenly the whole lot burst into flames. It was quite frightening, for them—not me!

Another experiment elsewhere required me to heat a mass of cork compressed in a jig suitably made of low-loss insulating materials and bolted together securely. On applying the power slowly jets of smoke would ooze out of the cork mass through gaps in the jig. Suddenly the jig gave way with bits of cork flying here and there. The inside of the mass was scorched. Simple with R.F.—the heat cannot escape through the cork. Uniformity of heating throughout a large mass of material is one of the advantages of di-electric heating. It is all well-known today but the early days of development were indeed interesting and eventful.

A particular application for these R.F. generators was developed for glueing up thick laminated wood shapes complete with veneers for the vast furniture industry. I used to call on piano manufacturers to see whether they could use R.F. heating with advantage for glueing up thick laminated assemblies. I remember one old works manager saying 'We've been making pianos with the old glues for years and years. We are certainly not going to change over to any newfangled gadgets for our instruments.' Where the deep penetration of heat was not needed we had devised a low voltage/high current transformer for applying surface heat for glueing veneers quickly. Several piano manufacturers adopted this speedy system for veneering piano falls. (The 'fall' is the lid over the keys. The part to which it is hinged is called the 'hollow'.) In this way I met most, if not all, of the main piano manufacturers in Britain, which was to prove very useful a few years later.

I became a specialist in this method of heating, and did about four hundred installations throughout the country. Our nearest competitor was Pye with some seventy-five installations, and last came GEC with some forty. But my firm, Rediffusion Ltd., was out for the market and so, in 1948 at the Dorland Hall, Regent Street, they held the first ever exhibition of Radio Frequency Heating. I remember handing to Sir John Donaldson a hot sardine sandwich heated in about twenty seconds. The sardine mix was just about heatable at that frequency, 50 MHz, in those developing days. Now just think of the number of microwave cookers there must be in use today!

After a number of years dealing with R.F. technology, it settled down to become less experimental and more routine and I got a bit bored by it so decided to take some time off and visit friends and relations in Canada and the USA. It was there that the player piano really got hold of me.

While in Canada I imported over a hundred Danemann pianos for use in schools and colleges. These were robust instruments capable of withstanding

the heavy punishment many school pianos receive, and they were at a competitive price the schools could afford. I also imported some other makes which I knew well from my days promoting the R.F. equipment, but it was mostly the reliable Danemanns which were bought. As I went around from town to town I would meet piano dealers and come across their second-hand instruments which included reproducing player pianos. At that time I did not fully appreciate just how clever these reproducing pianos were. It was not until I bought one and started to restore it as a hobby that I discovered how ingenious the inventors must have been.

Gradually I discovered there were quite a few different makes, each with its own special rolls and I collected up a number of these special rolls. This was in the late 1950s, when no one was taking any interest in these instruments. Occasionally, as I toured about, I would meet another collector and we would talk about these instruments, exchange information, addresses and so on, and this is how my world-wide network of contacts started.

My former director of Rediffusion Ltd., wrote to me in Canada asking me to return and do some more work on R.F. heating. He thought I should be doing something more useful than skating around the Rockies selling pianos, tape recorders, and electronic organs. 'You know you meet bears on the roads out there.' I had other ideas.

I travelled down the West Coast of the USA to visit my relatives. In the days of the silent films an uncle of mine became a famous Hollywood film make-up artist who wrote a book on the subject which was compulsory reading for any would-be make-up man, and he worked with all the stars in the heyday of that great town. Again, as I nosed around, I came across interesting



A 58-note player-organ in my flat at Hangar Lane in 1954. Built between 1900 and 1910 it had a wooden tracker bar and played 58-note rolls, some of which can be seen on the top of the instrument.

examples of automatic musical instruments, and I began to see the need to create a collection of them so that the technology of those earlier years would not be lost forever.

As with all things, my tour of Canada and the USA had to come to an end and I had to return to the UK, so I collected together all the rolls, etc., that I had acquired and had them crated and shipped to London. The labels just said 'Holland, London' and they found me. In those days there was no need for complicated post codes. The shippers really knew their business. Since then quite a number of crates have been shipped containing additions to the collection, but none has arrived so smoothly and with such a short address!

Looking back, I sometimes wonder why I ever came back from the USA. In 1987 I paid yet another visit which lasted several weeks and saw how they have developed their collections of instruments and how much support is given to those collections. Everything over there seems to hum along once it gets going with little or no red tape to hold it back. However, I did come back to my flat in Hanger Lane in West London, in the house of an old friend, Cecil Betts. The main room was originally a billiard room, so it was ideal for housing the instruments I began to collect—at least in the beginning!

I started by visiting most of the main piano showrooms in London and contacting the one or two firms which still had player piano parts in stock. Gradually I came to hear about reproducing pianos which were available, so I contacted the owners and bought one or two. I also continued collecting the special piano rolls, and spent many a happy hour sifting through boxes of mixed rolls in second-hand shops, haggling over the prices, and generally having a good time. Anyone who has ever collected things will know the



The billiard room at 20 Hanger Lane, London W.5., about 1907, displaying wedding presents. This was where I first collected my pianos in 1952, a Steinway-Welte (Green) Grand and a Weber Duo-Art Grand.

excitement of the unexpected find as well as the disappointment when a trail goes cold or when an object turns out not to be what was expected. I began to become known for my interest in the instruments and I would get letters and phone calls from people asking for help and advice on restoration. It occurred to me that it would be useful to form a society or group so that like-minded souls could swap information, meet together and provide a forum for discussion. In 1959 I placed an advertisement in *The Times* inviting those interested to contact me, and so was formed the Player Piano Group. I started it with my friend Lloyd Hills who came back with me from Canada, and Jack Shaylor. He acted as secretary, and from then on we enrolled those expressing an interest. Luba Hambourg contacted me and came to the first meeting. In her childhood she and her sisters Galia and Munia, used to play with my mother in Hastings. A committee was formed, a constitution drawn up, and our first meetings held. Subsequently other groups were formed elsewhere in Britain, and now there are a number of clubs and societies which cater for the increased numbers of those interested in the whole field of automatic musical instruments. It has given me particular pleasure over the years to watch these groups become established and grow, and in the course of time to receive various honours from them. Long may they all continue.

As the flat became filled with instruments I had to find additional storage which included friends' flats, houses, and garages. I think they must have dreaded my phone calls in case I was asking them to look after yet another instrument 'just for a few weeks.' With the growing interest being shown in my collection and the need to find more space, I started to write around. I have one letter on file from the Department of Education and Science dated 1960 saying the Science Museum could not offer accommodation and that the collection should be sold at auction! I came across an article describing the number of redundant churches in the country, and became aware that St. George's at Brentford was closed, so I approached the Vicar, the Rev. Arthur Court, and asked if I could store my instruments there. I eventually obtained all the necessary permissions from both the Church Authorities (to get all my pianos under one roof and for me to act as church caretaker) and the Local Authority (Hounslow Borough Council). It was seen as a temporary location until a more permanent place was found. A quarter of a century later we are still here and I can hardly believe it. In no other country would such a valuable collection have been allowed to remain in such poor conditions.

When I first came to the church it was in a dreadful state; the wooden floor blocks had been piled up by vandals, the boiler was under several inches of water, a library of historic books being stored in the church was scattered everywhere and in pools of water on the pews, the wood block floor was broken up and it has been a big problem ever since. There were several pianos in very poor condition, and the church hall was in a dreadful state as well. It was a sad place indeed. In those days I could not afford the extra rent (£5 per week) for the church hall so it was let to Vic Kettle, a photographer. He has been very helpful over the years but now I wish I had kept the hall as well. I could just have survived financially.

I got my nephew, Maurice Carder, and his school friend to assist in

clearing up the church, and I created various dry areas for storing the piano rolls. I also put up a polythene roof over the nave in order to keep the dirt and rain out as well as the heat in. I had rigged up the old boiler to burn waste oil. (I had done a similar thing back in 1947 for our house in Gravesend so I knew what was needed. I used to collect old sump oil from garages in a 40-gallon drum on the back of the family Daimler). Over the years I have been able to heat the museum for little cost by using waste oil. (Waste oil will produce about 19,000 BTUs per lb of oil [171,000 BTUs per gallon] and I am surprised this country just throws all this energy away.) In later years the Fire Officers made us remove all the polythene following a disastrous fire in the Isle of Man where many died.

In the space the church provided I was able to display my collection of instruments and also look towards further additions. In order to bring in some income I opened the collection to the public on weekend afternoons and struggled on a shoe string to keep things going. When we had slack periods I turned school teacher to a young Sea Scout who was issuing admission tickets, as he was having difficulty with his reading. This was the second time—as early in the war I used to instruct A.T.C. lads from Soho in Magnetism, Electricity, and English.

From the beginning I was determined that the instruments should be heard and not just seen as in some museums. This meant there must be an operator or demonstrator on hand. To this I wanted to add an explanation of why these instruments were designed, how they worked, and why they are important. Thus I started what I think was the first musical museum where live demonstrations took place all the time it was open. As others have developed similar museums I have noticed they too have adopted my approach.

Soon after opening Sidney Harrison (who later became a Patron) brought Lionel Salter from the B.B.C. to the museum. Lionel was Chief of Pianos there and he particularly wanted to hear all the Godowsky rolls I had. He was most impressed and this gave me great encouragement.

Once I saw the collection had popular appeal I decided to create a Trust registered as a charity. This was done, and I had it witnessed by Luba Hambourg, sister to Mark Hambourg, and by the Hon. Mrs. Dorothea Hambourg, his wife, on 25th May 1966. I could now rest assured that the collection would survive me and be of lasting benefit to the nation.

Turning now to the instruments, it is only possible in such a slim volume to highlight a few of them, and how they came to the collection. Elsewhere the history of the Wurlitzer and Aeolian Organs has been written as well as the Duo-Art 'Princess Beatrice' Grand Piano, so I will not repeat them here. When visitors see the instruments they can little imagine the searching, locating, negotiating, removal and transporting which has been done to bring them here, and then the tedious but challenging restoration.

Once I had brought all the existing instruments I owned to the church I was able to acquire a number of others. An early addition—a gift—to the collection was a Welte Vorsetzer (or push-up) which used the red Welte rolls. It arrived at the museum in 1963 from Yarnton, Oxford, having previously



At the Fotoplayer—an instrument requiring great dexterity but a real ‘show stopper’ on the tours.

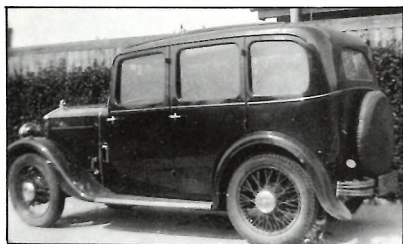
Photo: SARGENT PORTRAITS.



Just some of the orchestrions and pianos, with the smaller phonographs and gramophones on the left.



Our Daimler, which we had from 1936 to 1954. It cost £460 in 1936 and was sold for £100 eighteen years later. I collected waste oil for our heating by fixing a large drum on to the rear of the car.



My much loved Wolseley Hornet, which gave me much pleasure from 1931 to 1936.



The Church of St. George, Brentford, my front door for twenty-five years. Only the church and its hall now remain.
Photo: B.A.A.



The High Street about the time I first saw the church. Gas works completely surrounded the building. London United Electric Trams thundered by here—routes 57 & 67! I still want an old street arc lamp to hang outside the Museum.



28th October 1970. Charles Eshelby, an employee with the Welte company in its busiest years of the twenties, is with Mrs. Anita Nickels an American visitor and AMICA member. The piano is the Steinway-Welte (Green) Grand, once the property of the Physician to the King.

Photo: NORMAN DERRICK.

Mr. Clifford Curzon with Mrs. Curzon at the museum on Wednesday 28th May 1969, discussing the many recordings which Katherine Goodson made for the reproducing piano at the time when Mr. Curzon was studying with her.

Photo: VIC KETTLE.

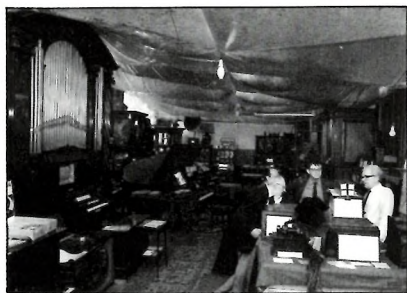


I have always believed the instruments should be heard as well as seen. So since the beginning I have always demonstrated them. Here a Polyphon is entertaining the public.



The back garden at St. George's before the 'White Shed' was erected and while the guttering was being repaired. This is the side few people ever see—not very inspiring.

Photo: MOBILE PRESS PHOTOS.



In 1972 the exhibition area looked like this. The 'tent' did allow me to heat the place a bit and get it warm. We had to remove the polythene ceiling as it was a fire risk.

Photo: KEYSTONE PRESS.



For many years this was the entrance to the 'tented' exhibition area. Several of these pianos are now on display at Holdenby House, Northampton, as we have no space for them in the museum.

Photo: KEYSTONE PRESS.



Flat on my back under a grand. Restoration work often requires the strangest working positions.

Outside my room in the wooden corridor in 1986. The roof always seemed to leak no matter what was done to it. The floor was absolutely rotten.

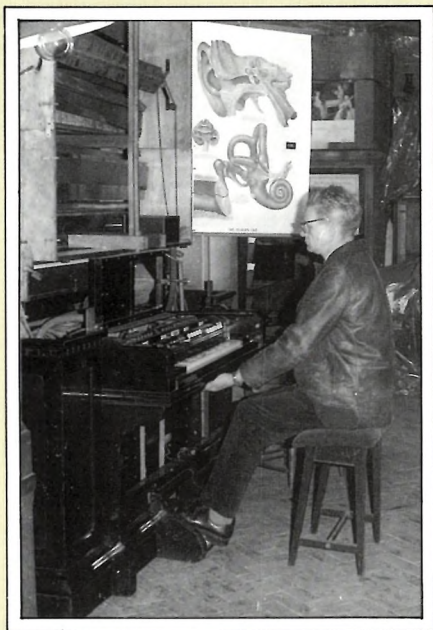
been the property of Mrs. Gladys Harris. The task of restoration was undertaken by John Taylor, who was one of the earliest volunteers at the museum, and I am happy to say is now one of the trustees. John took the whole unit apart and restored it most thoroughly. When it came back to the museum from John's it had an electrolytic rectifier with it which was in a very poor state. In 1975 my brother, Maurice—over on a few weeks' holiday from his home in New Zealand—rebuilt the rectifier using replacement timber and restoring the Borax jars. Sadly Maurice died in early 1988. He had been planning a return visit to the UK during the museum's twenty-fifth year.

The Welte Company made automatic instruments of many different types, and the collection now has a number of them. I first heard of the Welte Green Grand when I visited Bluthner's Showrooms in Conduit Street, London, shortly after my return from Canada. It was owned by Mrs. Mary Cordiner, widow of Dr. Mather Cordiner, C.V.O., who had been Physician to King George V. I arranged to visit her flat and saw the fine instrument which also had a cabinet containing a good selection of music. The price was £110 which, for me in those days, nearly broke the bank, but I was won over by the fact that there were rolls played by Gertrude Peppercorn. I had seen her playing at the Wigmore Hall and, after a concert one day I went back stage with one of her rolls. She was delighted and asked to hear the roll. I arranged for her to visit me at Hanger Lane for tea, and I played the rolls. She found it difficult to believe her playing style had changed over the years. By way of contrast Luba Hambourg walked into the church one day and recognised her brother's playing of 'La Source' by Leochetizky from a roll on a Duo-Art Grand.

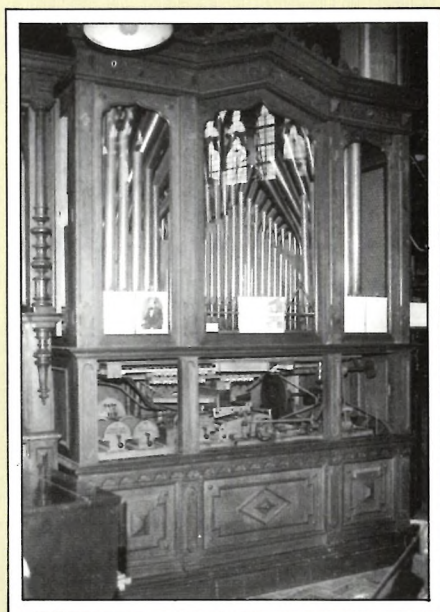
Around that time I heard about a Welte Orchestrion. A Mr. Poole, who was a coal merchant in Bishop Stortford, wanted an Aeolian Grand Piano and I worked out an arrangement for swapping one for the orchestrion. Unfortunately, by the time I had found him one he too had traced one and I nearly lost the deal. He told me about the instrument and its location, but I would have to settle with its owner. We settled that I should buy the orchestrion for £65 but would have to collect it from Bill's Café on the Southend Arterial Road at Laindon in Essex. Well, when it arrived at Brentford I was able to study it in detail. What had I done? I thought. It really was in a sorry state! Even though this was one of the earliest orchestrions I acquired it is only in the last two years we have got it into playing condition. It was badly worm-eaten, and certain parts were missing. It was decided to fit it with a Helios tracker bar which would allow it to play the popular dance tunes which were produced by Hupfeld for their Helios instruments. This is not as surprising as it may first appear. In the early 1960s I met in Antwerp Eugene de Roy, who had spent many years touring Britain selling Helios rolls, and he stated he had converted quite a few to take Helios rolls as the Welte rolls did not have the music many of the dance hall and ice rink proprietors wanted played. Welte rolls tended to be more light orchestral, opera, operetta and overtures, while café customers wanted popular tunes. The orchestrion is now in playing condition although much work still remains to be done to finish it completely.

Welte made very fine organ pipework and this is clearly heard on the 'Cottage' Orchestrion as well as the Reproducing Pipe Organ.

Talking about orchestrions brings to mind another firm of builders whose instruments were popular all over Europe—Imhof & Mukle. We have three of them in the collection, each different in both design, sound and appearance. In July 1968 I visited a school in Shropshire following an enquiry from the school who had been put on to me by Imhofs in London. The school had originally been a private house, and built into the panelling of the main hall was a weight-operated Imhof & Mukle Orchestrion which used pinned wooden



1964 and I have just started to work on the restoration of an Aeolian Orchestrelle.



The Imhof and Mukle Orchestrion which we had on loan for many years and then had to struggle to buy in 1980.

barrels to carry the tune. An offer of £150 was made for it and shortly afterwards dismantling commenced. During the process some of the schoolboys damaged a number of the more fragile pipes. Certain parts had gone missing over the years so restoration was inevitably going to be a long job. One vital part—the main 8-inch drive cog—had been very badly damaged, I suspect through misuse of the weight mechanism. However, Keith Harding, a friend and expert of the restoration of musical boxes, undertook to have a new one made. This took some time and the instrument stood forlorn for several years. Once the cog was made and functioned correctly, work could start on the pipe work. Another great supporter and expert organ builder, Bill Sellars, restored the pipework and found other suitable pipes for those missing. The tuning of the pipes on the instrument proved difficult, as others have experienced. We tried a tuning box, but we had little success. There was also the problem of pressure changes as different ranks were brought into play. I regret that even now the instrument still needs much work to finish it.

Another Imhof & Mukle Orchestrion in the collection came from Imhof's shop in New Oxford Street, London. It had stood in the shop for years, and unlike the one I have just described, used cardboard roll cassettes for the music. I had known about it for a long time, and shortly after I opened the museum I approached them to see if I could buy it. They would not sell it, but because they were modernising their store, they said I could have it on permanent loan. For many years it was the star attraction of the tours, in the days before the Aeolian or Wurlitzer Organs were used to finish the demonstrations. I could not count the number of people who must have peered into its works and seen its ancient electric motor still driving the mechanism. When it came to the museum it had a modern 240V a.c. motor, quite an anachronism, but neatly fixed in at the back was the original 100V d.c. I had it refurbished and tested, and through my training as an electrical engineer I knew it was a very early design. Members of the Science Museum and Institute of Electrical Engineers have come to the museum to draw and measure it. A crisis arose in June 1979 when we received notification that the orchestrion was to be sent for sale at auction. Imhofs had been taken over and the parent company decided to move out of the retail end of the market. The books showed that they owned the instrument and they wanted to cash it in. £8,000 was the asking price, a large sum for us. An appeal was launched, and following several generous donations and an acquisition grant from the Science Museum, we were able to put in an offer within hours of the deadline. The offer was accepted, and we now own it outright. A handsome gift towards the total was received from the owners.

In contrast to the large orchestrions are the violin playing instruments. The Mills Novelty Company's Violano causes many a smile when it plays now, but when I acquired them there was little to smile about. No one knew much about them and how they worked, so I struggled for many hours puzzling out the electric circuits. I acquired eleven of these instruments which, at that time were stored in a Rotherhithe warehouse. They were only £10 each. I had to select the best one to restore and cannibalise some of the others for spares. In later years, when the true worth of these became better known, I was able to

swap the spare ones for other instruments. I had to sell two or three to keep the museum running, for example to Marino Marini's Museum in Italy, the Science Museum in Melbourne, and a museum in Cornwall.

We have quite a collection of Mills instruments—electric piano, race horse piano, violano and double violano. If we had the space it would make a wonderful temporary exhibition to recreate a Mills showroom similar to the one I have seen in early photographs. All the instruments are coin-operated and used to earn their owners a reasonable income. I found some of them under a railway arch near Waterloo Station in London.

Our other violin playing instrument was made by the Hupfeld Company, another prestigious maker of a wide variety of instruments. The three violins on the top of the piano attract many comments. I acquired the instrument from an antique shop in Abergavenny, Wales, in 1969. It cost £90. On arrival at the museum a thorough inspection showed that it could be put into working condition reasonably quickly, so we got it playing and it became part of the main tour. Unfortunately it stood in a part of the church where, in snowy weather, water would back up on the roof, and during one very bad winter water dripped on to it causing damage (c. 1980). The instrument was taken out of commission and stripped down. Richard Cole, another long-time supporter and now a trustee, has carefully restored every part and reassembled it, and it will now be heard again following several years of silence.

Hupfeld also made the Animatic Clavist Sinfonie Jazz Piano, Model No. AC9. This was made as a coin-operated instrument for use in pubs, cafés, and the like. I had heard a rumour that there was a 'double-decker' piano in a dealer's shop in Fulham so I went along. There it was all painted up to look smart, but nothing played. Unfortunately I had no spare cash that year, having bought several instruments already. Another collector I knew bought it and after some time I came across it again in a barn near Folkestone. By this time I had built up some more funds and was able to acquire it. It was in a very bad state and took many months of restoration, and even now I still find ways in which its performance can be improved. To give an example of its state, I found a bird's nest, a mouse nest, a packet of drawing pins, and a meat skewer in it.

Hupfeld were excellent manufacturers of instruments and made fine reproducing pianos. Their DEA system, c. 1905, which competed with the early red Welte system 1904, was one I had long wanted to obtain for the collection. Eventually I heard of one and bought it. The beautiful polished wood had been painted cream, and wallpaper had been stuck on and painted over the ends, but it was complete and I thought we could make something of it. As an upright piano it had a beautiful tone and I was sure it would sound great when we had the DEA reproducing player mechanism restored. Shortly after it came to the museum I was offered a second one! Nothing for years then two within a few weeks of each other. Naturally I said 'Yes', and this one had very good ebony casework as well as good tone. On careful investigation I discovered they had next but one serial numbers: a chance in a thousand! We disposed of the first one several months later and are indeed proud of the quality of the DEA mechanism in the Feurich piano.

Another system Hupfeld designed for reproducing pianos was the Triphonola, and although these are rare in Britain we have had three examples in the collection. Perhaps the finest one is in the Bluthner Piano. The player mechanism is quite early and was restored beautifully by Patrick Handscombe, another of my helpers, while the piano was returned to Bluthners for overhaul. It has Aliquot stringing. The Aliquot system—that speciality in Bluthner instruments—consists of a fourth string co-ordinated with the three strings of each note. It strengthens the upper tone content of the treble register and adds intensity and beauty of sound. The quality of the restoration was such that we entered it in the Museum Competition of 1976 and were fortunate to win a prize of £561 from National Heritage which helped towards the costs of the work.

Many of the instruments I have mentioned were the ones which were part of the foundations of the collection as it is today. In more recent years we have become more selective and have acquired instruments to show significant aspects of the development of automatic musical instruments. Examples of more recent acquisitions include the Chickering Ampico Model B, probably the last reproducing player piano made in their factory in the USA in 1942. Containing as it does the most sophisticated of all the systems, we were fortunate indeed to have an American friend (Dr. Frank Adams) who told me of its availability so I could get an offer in quickly. At the time I did not know how we would pay for it as the prices had risen so much since I first started collecting. However, with the support of the trustees I negotiated its purchase and shipping. On arrival at Southampton there was another shock. The Customs and Excise wanted more payment to cover the VAT, and despite lengthy exchanges of letters about it being an exhibit in a museum run by a charitable trust, and how antiques were not subject to VAT and we were trying to import heritage unlike many who were selling it abroad, we could not move them, so £500 VAT had to be paid. The Trust's bank accounts had never been large but they were now very, very empty!

The same American source led me to another find in the USA. A very rare Fotoplayer. It was one of only four found of the 2,000 made for use in silent cinemas. Buying an instrument unseen is always a high risk, but I was able to rely absolutely on my contact's advice. I settled the price (the highest the museum had ever paid for any instrument), and we were all excited as we opened the three crates containing the player piano, the organ in the percussion cabinet, and the wind regulators. Because of the uneven floor at the museum and the need to have the piano and organ standing level next to each other, a large metal ground frame became necessary. This was made by my cousin, Charles Butchard, who used to move Vickers heavy machinery all over the place so knew what was needed. We also needed 220V a.c. 60 Hz. (the American system), and the Director of Brush Electrics was delighted to have his apprentices make up a motor frequency changer unit. It is a beautiful piece of engineering. During one winter we assembled it, had the player action restored, and got it playing. Since then we have renewed the bass strings, had the piano action restored, and completed the pneumatic controls. We have had some fun with it since we got it going. It is a real party stopper! It is not

anywhere near as sophisticated as the beautiful reproducing grands, but it demands a physical dexterity from the operator which has to be seen to be believed.

I remember in 1958 on my return from Vancouver, calling at the Piano House in Chicago, Lyon & Healey. Back in the old days they had Fotoplayer showrooms where they would invite cinema operators to sit at these instruments and apply sound effects to any films they would put on. Much practice was needed. The brief heyday of the Fotoplayer was from 1908, and it was eventually supplanted by the Wurlitzer in the 1920s.

I suppose I have always disliked officialdom, particularly when it was obvious to me that injustice was being done. In 1942 I worked for the Ministry of Works and was required to deal with the electricity supply to various major public buildings which included Buckingham Palace. Towards the end of the war I discovered some customers were being supplied at a more expensive tariff than was necessary. When I raised the matter at a senior level the roof fell in, questions were asked in Parliament, and I was threatened with prosecution under the Official Secrets Act—even to this day I cannot see how the supply and tariff rates of electricity can be an official secret. After much internal fighting I left the Ministry, but later in life I used that experience to help in a number of causes.

Perhaps my biggest battle with official injustice was over Sir David Salomon's house in Tonbridge, Kent. I discovered that this inventor's most interesting house had been left 'for the people of Kent' in 1937. The house contained a 'time capsule' of a Science Theatre complete with a large Welte Reproducing Pipe Organ, with most of it untouched for over sixty years. The house was a nursing home, and by some sleight of hand, passed to the National Health Service. In the early 1970s they decided to close down the nursing home and turn it into a training centre. The two original covenants do not allow for such a use nor is there clear legal evidence that the NHS actually should own it. The plans proposed involved bricking up the organ, destroying the Science Theatre, and ripping out all the early equipment. I petitioned and wrote hundreds of letters, won support for the case, and even had a debate in the House of Lords about the matter. Vandalism of this unique theatre still takes place, and its best protection would have been for our museum to take it over and run it as a working, living building. I am still determined that this official misuse of authority should be challenged.

Over the years the museum has looked at many buildings as a new home for the collection. There are too many battles on that front to outline here, but some include the re-use of the Luxor Cinema in Twickenham where we planned to create a major complex in the heart of the town which would have given the whole community a resource as well as bringing tourists into an area needing such a trade, but despite many months of discussion with the owners, the local authority, and community groups, the planning authority approved a scheme for demolition and the construction of flats and shops on the site.

A similar tale can be told about our imaginative scheme to preserve the Grade II listed cinema at Northfields, Ealing, only to find after years of work

that the Local Authority and English Heritage gave permission for it to be turned into a dance hall, ruining for ever this unique example of a 1930s atmospheric cinema.

As mentioned previously, I was advised early on that I should give my collection to the Science Museum in London rather than develop it independently. How wrong they were! The growth of independent museums and the often exciting and active ways they display their collections has trail-blazed the way for the 'official', and to my mind, often 'stuffy' public museums. There are many automatic instruments in public museums which are never played—sometimes tape recordings are played which seems daft when the real thing can play itself! In Europe many museums have been developed following my pattern, except that there the governments and local authorities recognise the importance of the collections and their tourist potential, and have helped in major ways to provide suitable accommodation. I have received offers from Japan and the USA to transport the whole collection to those countries and have it housed in specially constructed buildings. But we have struggled on in our own way and perhaps some of our current plans will be more successful than those in the past.

When I started to develop the museum I little thought that it would bring so many statements of public recognition. The biggest single honour was to be presented with the M.B.E. by the Queen at Buckingham Palace in October 1979. Not only did it come as a complete surprise but it was a tribute indirectly to the many volunteers without whom little could have been achieved.

I was also greatly honoured when the museum's trustees commissioned a portrait of me for the museum. Painted by my cousin, Margaret Holland-Sargent, a famous US portrait painter, and presented by her to the trustees at the Museum of London on the 3rd October 1986, it now hangs in the museum.

I have received many awards from societies and specialist groups for services to the world of musical instruments, and was the first person outside the USA to receive the special award of the Music Box International. The Player Piano Group gave me a special dinner and presentation at their Silver Jubilee in 1984, and although I have disputed some of the management committee's decisions, I have always taken an interest in encouraging enthusiasts to enjoy these fine instruments.

As the museum has grown stronger I have been able to take some time away to travel around the world both to publicise the museum, and to reinforce contacts with collectors and museums. I have visited Japan, New Zealand, most European countries east and west, and the United States of America. Often these trips have included radio and television appearances, giving talks and sometimes specialist advice on restoration. Wherever I go I am treated with such kindness and consideration that I sometimes have to pinch myself just to make sure it is not a dream.

As I ponder where the next twenty-five years will take me and the museum I am reassured on both counts; first given my age—shall I just say 'it comes to us all in the end'? But the museum is now a charity with a group of trustees who have its best interests at heart and who are as enthusiastic about it as I am.

I know they will steer it safely on not only for the next quarter of a century but for many years after that too.

Our immediate challenge will be to relocate the collection in a nearby building on a permanent basis and develop a proper display in addition to doing those many other things we have never had the space to do—expanding our educational role, researching into the music rolls much more, extending our range of concert activities, and creating special exhibitions related to our exhibits. All these activities will cost money and so we must also ensure that we are an economically sound organisation with a strong financial base. If we achieve all that then we will have achieved a very great deal. I look forward to these challenges with the same excitement that I had when I first started all those years ago,



Linton Lodge, 34 Pelham Road, Gravesend. Residence of the Holland family firm 1919–1935.

Back cover:

*My portrait by Margaret Holland Sargeant
commissioned by the Trustees in 1986.*

Photo: VIC KETTLE.

